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ALBANIA

SUCCESS STORY

Mobilizing for Free Elections

Albanians work together to mobilize voters and ensure a fair election



Photo: USAID/Stephanie A. Pepi

Pjerin Marku works for Albania's Coalition Against Corruption, an organization that has trained 3,000 domestic election observers.

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A month before Albania's July 3, 2005, parliamentary elections, a dozen people gathered to heatedly discuss where observers should be posted. In the room next door, half a dozen computers were recording the amount of press each party received in newspapers, TV and radio. Every two weeks from May through election day, media monitors held a press conference to reveal their findings.

"We will follow the election, looking for problems and irregularities — we will follow everything that will happen from the beginning to the end," said Pjerin Marku of the Albania Coalition Against Corruption, an organization that has trained 3,000 domestic election observers with support from USAID. "This is the first time that we monitor not only quantitative data, but also qualitative. After the first report, a lot of media changed the way they report about the campaigns" to make their coverage more objective, he said.

To ensure a free and fair election, USAID has supported a range of activities, including civic forums, televised debates and media and election monitoring. In cooperation with Albania's Central Election Commission, USAID also helped update the national voter registry and create digital maps, pinpointing where people live and where the voting sites should be.

In past elections, each of Albania's 4,700 voter polling stations counted and reported its own results, but a new law was passed in December 2004 that instituted centralized counting. For this election, ballot boxes would be transported to 100 counting centers, reducing the possibility of fraud. USAID helped train officials on this new process, supporting trips to observe central counting in Austria and the United Kingdom.

The Commission also held a voter awareness campaign called "My Vote," urging voters to cast a ballot. TV and radio spots ran for months. Sample voting kiosks were set up on the streets of 14 cities. Ads also ran on street banners, billboards and in newspapers. The message to vote was even placed on sugar packets. "This is the first time that anything like this has been done in Albania," said Adriatik Mema of the Central Election Commission. "These promotional materials have been done even in the language of minority groups — so you can find them in Greek, Serbian, Macedonian."